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JEAN BAUDRILLARD: CATASTROPHE AND TERRORISM

NECROPOLITICS

Catastrophe and Implosion

Other possibilities of resistance arise around the issue of implosion. The system insulates itself against crisis by resisting explosion. It converts the explosive force of crisis into a homeopathic dose of simulated catastrophe. Against this constant drip-feed of simulated catastrophe, Baudrillard suggests, the only means of mitigation is to make a real catastrophe arrive. This is perhaps why events like Hurricane Katrina are almost euphoric for some survivors, though traumatic for others. Disaster unties the knots of anxiety and terror in which people are caught. This is also why terrorism is so fascinating. Real violence makes the

invisible violence of security disappear.

According to Baudrillard, power is collapsing. Institutions and “the social” are collapsing. Implosive events take this process further, speeding it up. They are necessarily incalculable in terms of their effects. The endpoint of this process is catastrophe. For Baudrillard, catastrophe is the abolition of causes and the creation of ‘pure, non-referential connections’. Such connections are inherently beautiful and seductive. Catastrophe is not necessarily disastrous as is usually assumed. It is a disaster only for meaning and power.

Implosion offers possibilities because of the generalisation of the remainder. When the system becomes saturated, everything turns to and becomes the remainder. The remainder – what is barred – continues to exist. Because the system has claimed to be everything, it comes back inside and shatters the system. This may be why the system now imagines itself under siege from enemies within. Without the imaginary, without a space beyond the system’s coded functioning, it can no longer keep what it excludes outside. He suggests, for instance, that architects could form a conception of cities based on their remainders, such as cemeteries and waste grounds. Such an act would be fatal to architecture.

It is thus on the remainder that a new intelligibility is founded. For instance, sanity is refounded on the basis of madness (the theory of the unconscious). Metropolitan societies exclude the indigenous, only to find the indigenous at their foundation (urban ‘tribes’, gangs, subcultures..) Death is excluded, only to be seen or foreshadowed everywhere. Structures become unstable because the remainder is no longer in a specified place. It is everywhere. When everything is repressed or alienated, the entire field is repressed or alienated – so nothing is repressed or alienated, everything is within the visible field. Repressed energy is no longer available to be channelled by the system.

The totalising nature of power today makes it more vulnerable than ever. The more total the system seems, the more inspiring any little setback for it becomes. Every small defeat now carries the image of a chain reaction bringing down the system. Baudrillard proposes a strategy of forcing power to occupy its own place, so as to make itself obscene. By making power appear as power, its absence is made visible, and it disappears.

Death as revolutionary force

Death also contains possibilities for resistance. For Baudrillard, people secretly dream of symbolic exchange. The forces once released in exchange are now displaced to the unconscious. There is a social incapacity to confront death in the present situation.

The accidental or violent death gains special significance in western culture as the only kind of death which is talked about. According to Baudrillard, we are fascinated with violent death because it is the last refuge of the energies associated with sacrifice and ritual. This turns death into a revolutionary force. ‘In a system where life is ruled by value and utility, death becomes a useless luxury, and the only alternative’.

Every unapproved death now becomes subversive. This is why murderers, outlaws and terrorists are fascinating. Death, sex, violence and madness all become fascinating, because in the western system, they are not exchanged. They are repressed.

Suicide for instance becomes an act of resistance: in self-immolations, suicide bombings, suicides in defiance of prison or asylum regimes. Baudrillard also sees a suicidal implication in revolts likely to provoke repression, in attacks on one's own neighbourhood, and so on. Suicide is threatening to the system because no reply is possible. It carries the logic of symbolic exchange. It is total defeat for the system to be unable to achieve total perfection.

Another example is mass resistance to the enforcement of safety. According to Baudrillard, the masses constantly resist the imposition of security and safety on them. For instance, they oppose road safety measures, or fail to apply workplace safety rules. Baudrillard thinks this is a way for people to seize back a bit of control over their lives, at the expense of the risk of death.

Since power is founded in letting live, in the deferral of the death of the slave, it cannot be defeated by staying alive. A radical response would be an immediate death. Firstly, there are cases where death as such is used politically – suicide bombing, self-immolation and so on. Secondly, death might be thought of in terms of high-risk activism: facing death rather than go on conforming, as in the revolts in Syria, Libya and Egypt, or in certain kinds of risky direct action such as chaining oneself to a railtrack.

This stance of 'death before dishonour', of refusing the system's 'work-or-die' or 'conform-or-else', is also implicit in every radical nonconformity, however far it seems from a real risk of death. Thirdly, death can also be thought of as 'social death' or symbolic death, as self-transformation, becoming-other, the 'death' of the ego (or false self), or as something akin to a Zizekian Act. Baudrillard claims that the 'masses' are constantly resisting the system by giving it fatal responses. They are contributing to the system's self-destruction by refusing to put in any energies from outside it.

Subjective transformation

It is also possible to reconstruct direct, intuitive relations which bypass the code. Baudrillard analyses an account – Zhuangzi's butcher – which suggests that he sees resonance, local/indigenous knowledge, and intuition as providing an alternative to the code. He proposes this approach as a model for psychoanalysis and semiotics.

Such approaches are taken to work in spaces defined by the inner logic of the entity to which one relates, rather than to what is perceived or sensed of it. It splits the observed object and instead follows the underlying structure beneath it. It thereby enters into a symbolic exchange with the object. He is suggesting the existence of a qualitative dimension of real phenomena which escapes their reduction to the code, and through which a direct relation can be established.

This type of gesture is taken to be a death or metamorphosis of the subject. By leaving the 'phallic identity' of the ego, people can recognise their own ambivalence, enter the field of polymorphous perversity, and make 'the play of desire as symbolic exchange' possible again. They experience a 'joyous expulsion' of the superstructures of being and will. Baudrillard suggests that this restores a world where things are separate. Ritually separated phenomena do not touch each other, or if they do, they do not become interchangeable. This would get us out of the interchangeability of simulacra today.

Similar themes pop up occasionally in other places in his works. Baudrillard's discussions of eroticism also suggest an orientation to expressive, rather than instrumental, outlooks on life. Baudrillard elsewhere discusses intuition in terms of the replacement of 'signification' with 'divination', and of separation from the world with fusion in the world. He also suggests that awareness on a tactile or bodily level is necessary to create an initiatory or ceremonial aura. Baudrillard also sees certain cultural works, such as 'Crash', performing a kind of reversal which introduces symbolic exchange into the world of simulation. Substances such as neon and concrete come to seem deadly and fascinating.

Terrorism and death

Outbidding is another key concept in Baudrillard's theory of resistance. Baudrillard argues that the system can be brought down by defying it with a gift to which it cannot respond except by collapsing. This is known as 'overbidding' – raising the stakes higher than the system can respond.

He sees this prefigured in terrorism, hostage taking, and sacrificial martyrdom: the terrorist or the hostage is sacrificed and the system has nothing to offer in return. Terrorism returns to the field of symbolic exchange. It both mirrors the system's own violence, and shows a glimpse of the symbolic violence which is beyond it, and hence is its own death. Baudrillard seems to be thinking mainly of leftist groups such as the Red Army Fraction when he discusses terrorism, although he admits that his account of terrorist effects runs against the ideology of such groups.

Terrorism, uniquely, confronts the system in this way, 'in broad daylight'. It is the last way in which the system is checked. It is violence and derision carried to the limit, beyond what the system can bear. Yet terrorism is insufficient to bring down the system. It does not succeed in giving death a meaning, the dead are annulled by indifference, and the system responds with its own nihilism, a nihilism of neutralisation. It puts us in an era of 'events without consequences', where the event ends in its televised representation.

Terrorism is the ecstatic growth of violence or politics. It is an ascension to limits without any rules of the game. It tries desperately to disrupt the functioning of the system's daily deterrence or terror by replacing the system's organised, systematic death with elective death. In order not to be taken hostage, it takes others hostage. Yet the hostage is suddenly shown to represent nothing, to be seen by the system as dispensable. Even a politician such as Aldo Moro is shown to be dispensable.

Terrorism proclaims inexchangeability from the start. This, for Baudrillard, makes it utopian. It experimentally stages an impossible exchange, and thus makes visible the disappearance of exchange and of the social contract. For Baudrillard, contracts are an illusion in any case. Even in capitalism, everything is really about stakes and defiance, the destruction of meaning and subjectivity, not contracts. The death of the contract is the return of symbolic exchange.

The complicity between terrorists and the media is for Baudrillard central to their power. Terrorism is a superconductive event – it affects not simply specific sites, but entire systems. It occurs in the non-places of the system, such as airports – the same spaces from which the world is now managed. It opens the era of the transpolitical, in which terror replaces

alienation.

Terrorism is already in some sense simulated terrorism, performed for the media. It is a 'special effect'. On some level, terrorism is isomorphic with the masses. It is non-representative, but of a similar kind. We are all hostages, since we're vulnerable to precarious risks outside our control, and used as dissuasive arguments against others' uses of power (against nuclear attacks, against a general strike and so on).

Terrorism radicalises and performs this hostage status. It tends ultimately to become a destruction of all meaning – without objectives and goals, representation, solidarity and so on. Like natural disaster, it is a subjectless subversion.

Terrorism is not so much violent in itself as the source of a violent spectacle, a theatre of cruelty. It returns to the level of the pure symbolic challenge, counterposing this challenge to the system's models. It breaks down fixed boundaries because terrorist, hostage, audience and power become inetrchangeable. For instance, it is usually impossible to determine whether a mediatised terrorist figure (such as Baader, Che, Bin Laden, Zarqawi, perhaps Saddam or Gaddafi...) was murdered, committed suicide, or died in battle. This indeterminacy is part of the romanticism, the fascination of terrorism. (Getting into arguments about what really happened is seen by Baudrillard as a trap which returns us to the field of meaning).

Terrorism is not simply state terrorism by groups without political power. State terrorism is ultimately given its lifeblood by truth and meaning. It seeks a mobilisation against terrorism around the values of truth, meaning and the code. Terrorism counterposes to it a superior, meaningless form of violence. It counterposes an imaginary realm to the real, which carries implosion and destruction into the heart of the real and of power. It seeks to provoke the system into an excess of reality which will cause it to collapse.

According to Baudrillard, the system replies to terrorism with its own suicide or disarray. In his piece on 911, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Baudrillard argued that 911 was 'what everyone wished for', a suicide of the system. The more omnipotent the system becomes, the more it generates its own self-destruction. Death becomes a weapon against a zero-death system. Struggle moves to the terrain of challenge, outbidding and the symbolic.

In many ways, the subversive force of terrorism is counterposed to its intent. Terrorism intends to restore meaning. In fact, it simply accelerates the death of meaning. It is nevertheless different enough to be specified as the catastrophic or crystalline form of transparency, as a solution to the everyday terror of deterrence. It puts an end to the 'scene' of deterrence, its imaginary functioning.

The media play an ambiguous role – at once carrying the political exploitation of fear and the condemnation of terrorism, and propagating the 'brutal charm' of terrorism. The media and the masses amplify terrorism.

taken from here: <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-baudrillard-13/>

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